

How Secure Is Pakistan's Plutonium?

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A deeply disturbing picture of terrorist intent has emerged in recent weeks as blueprints for building nuclear weapons have been discovered in the wreckage of abandoned Al Qaeda safe houses. These blueprints and other documents, while largely available in the public domain, sharpen the need for a vigorous American policy to deal with unsecured nuclear, chemical and biological materials. Even if terrorist manufacture of nuclear bombs is unlikely, substantial dangers remain of terrorists using radioactive material in low-tech "dirty" bombs.

The main nuclear security problem posed by Al Qaeda today is access to radioactive materials in Pakistan. However, for a decade we have focused on the former Soviet Union. Since the end of the cold war, approximately 175 incidents of smuggling or attempted theft of nuclear materials there have been thwarted. But the threat remains, as the Russian Defense Ministry reported on Nov. 6, when the last attempt at theft was made.

For Russia, a sensible solution is available - the Nunn-Lugar "cooperative threat reduction" program to improve the security of Russia's nuclear materials, technology and expertise. This week, the House Republican leadership will decide whether to finance the next phase. The program is only 40 percent complete; finishing it will take another quarter of a century at the current rate of funding. It is past time to fully implement and finance this important legislation.

The Nunn-Lugar initiative can serve as a valuable precedent in addressing security problems in Pakistan. Neither Pakistan nor India has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Nor has either country engaged in negotiations, under the auspices of the United Nations Conference on Disarmament, to protect against theft of fissile materials. This reluctance in India and Pakistan to recognize international norms, however, should not alter our resolve to improve the security of nuclear materials in South Asia. While Islamabad is widely believed to have the material for 25 to 40 medium-yield bombs, most of its nuclear devices are kept in component parts, not as assembled warheads. The storage procedures, quite elaborate prior to Sept. 11, were altered again on Oct. 7 when the American bombing of Afghanistan began. Separately stored uranium and plutonium cores and their detonation assemblies were moved to six new secret locations around the country.

The new storage patterns were designed to allow for rapid assembly and deployment, but attackers will nonetheless find it much more difficult to confiscate Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Even if Al Qaeda obtained radioactive materials from a sympathizer at one of Pakistan's plants for making weapons-grade nuclear materials, as some reports have suggested, the material would still have to be shaped into a fissionable core with detonation switches and delivery housings.

Such a complex effort would be difficult to carry out in an Afghan cave. But we can hardly count on terrorists always being under bombardment in caves. Pakistan's nuclear command hierarchy, overhauled in 2000, was also revamped on Oct. 7 in the wake of a broad military-intelligence shake-up. Pakistan's president and army chief, Pervez Musharraf, created the strategic planning division and appointed a moderate general, Khalid Kidwai, to oversee Pakistani nuclear assets. Self-policing, however, is not enough. Since 1990, American sanctions have blocked sale or transfer of any technology that might have a military use - including technologies that would improve nuclear security. American export license controls - and, where necessary, Non-Proliferation Treaty and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty compliance rules preventing United States exports - should be waived to transfer the technology needed to protect Pakistan's nuclear arsenals and materials from unauthorized use.

The Bush administration should make available American vaults, sensors, alarms, tamper-proof seals, closed-circuit cameras and labels to identify, track and secure Islamabad's nuclear materials.

Such precautions would dramatically reduce the probability that even the most devoted bin Laden supporter inside a Pakistani nuclear enrichment facility would get very far in trying to deliver stolen uranium or plutonium to terrorists.

There is a real risk that Pakistan's fanatics might collaborate with Al Qaeda; the plans, recently discovered in Kabul, for a helium balloon armed with anthrax have been attributed to a Pakistani nuclear scientist turned Taliban philanthropist. But the risk is manageable if we can help the Musharraf government focus on this threat, as Russia has done in the Nunn-Lugar cooperative threat reduction program.

Unless we follow such a course, we face the very real possibility of terrorist militias obtaining not just blueprints but the materials to fashion and detonate weapons of mass destruction. We also risk sharpening the debate in Pakistani military and political circles about whether its nuclear expertise should be shared with other Muslim countries. It is hard to think of two developments that are less in our interest.

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